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# THOUGHTS ON IDENTITY, CHOICE AND COALITION

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Our assignment, which was for each of us to choose three words, and three words only, to describe ourselves, presented us with an interesting and challenging task. Obviously, each person on this panel has multiple identities. Still, it is clear that some of the identities that we claim as individuals are more important to us than others. I believe that the way that we describe ourselves has major implications for our ability, as people of color, to build successful coalitions. I also think that it is significant that, when pushed to limit the number of words we can use, we select certain words to describe ourselves and not others.

The three words I chose to describe myself were "Black," "mother" and "professor."

The fact that I am a Black person permeates everything I do. It shapes my views of the world; it also shapes how the world sees and reacts to me. Being Black affects my life twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Being Black is often a source of joy; it is also sometimes a source of pain and discomfort. But it always is inescapable.

I chose "mother" as the second word to describe myself. "Mother" is an economical word, obviating the need for me to use an additional word to indicate the fact that I am of the female gender. Thus, by selecting "mother," I got two descriptors for the price of one. The other reason I chose "mother" is because of the sheer importance of that status in my life. The fact that I am a mother, like the fact that I am Black, permeates my life twenty-four hours a day. Motherhood is a tremendous joy and a tremendous responsibility. My responsibilities as a mother, especially as a single mother, shape virtually every moment of my day, in both my professional and my personal life. My role as a mother affects everything I do or try to do, including the matter of whether or not I would even be able to attend this meeting.

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\* Professor of Law, Rutgers University School of Law at Newark. This essay is a slightly expanded version of my panel presentation at the First National Meeting of the Regional People of Color Legal Scholarship Conferences, on March 26, 1999, at The John Marshall Law School in Chicago. The panel was entitled, "Celebrating Our Emerging Voices: People of Color Speak—Coherence or Tower of Bable?"

The label of "professor" is also critical to my self-definition. For me, this label is a description of myself as a person who is immersed in the world of ideas. It is also a reminder to me of the position of enormous privilege that I occupy as a tenured law professor. We professors have a great deal of autonomy with respect to our choices about work, including when and where we put in our working hours. Perhaps most importantly, as a professor, I am essentially free to pursue and express my ideas without fear of repercussion. Because of this, I feel that I have a special responsibility to write and speak out about issues that affect Black people and other people of color.

Our assignment limited us to three words. If I had had the option of choosing a fourth word to describe myself, that word would have been "lawyer." I debated with myself for a few minutes as to whether I would be "cheating" on the panel's assignment if, for my third descriptor, I used the phrase "law professor" as a way of sneaking in both "lawyer" and "professor" as descriptors.

Although I have not practiced law for a number of years, the fact that I am a lawyer is also a very important part of my self-identification. I try to continue to think of myself as a lawyer to remind myself that although as an academic I am immersed in the world of ideas, as a lawyer, especially one with litigation experience, I also have tools that empower me to take action that can result in concrete changes in people's lives. I always hope that at least some people will find my scholarship to be useful, but I also retain a commitment to using my other skills to help to effect change with respect to issues that I feel are important.

Sometimes the labels I choose for myself depend on the setting that I happen to be in. In a group of married mothers, I may define myself as a single mother. In a group of women of color, I may define myself as a Black woman. In a group of people who live in suburbs, I may define myself as a resident of the inner city. In particular circumstances, I may define myself as having come from a particular socioeconomic background, or as being a graduate of a particular school, or even as having a particular birth order among siblings.

In short, at times we use labels to include ourselves in groups; at other times we use labels to define ourselves outside of groups. Furthermore, the way we identify ourselves can have both public and private functions. Privately, a label can affirm for us who we are or who we choose to be. Publicly, a self-identifying label can tell others how we would like for them to see us.

None of these functions of self-labeling are negative per se. I think that in relationship to the themes of this meeting, and in par-

ticular the theme of this panel, the important question is: how do the ways we identify ourselves help us as people of color to move closer to goals that we share?

I found it interesting that not one woman on this panel, which included Black and Hispanic women, described herself as a "woman of color." Some of the Black women described themselves as Black; the Latina woman described herself as Latina. Is it significant that each woman chose a specific racial or ethnic identifier over the generic description of "woman of color"?

I must say that I unambiguously self-identify as a Black woman. I do not think of myself as a "woman of color," and certainly would never refer to myself as a "colored woman." Black women, Latinas, Asian American women and Native American women may all be considered to be non-white, all of us certainly have been the victims of racism, and none of us has the status in this society that is accorded to white women. Still, women of color of different ethnicities have different histories and present realities.

For example, the stereotypes that many Americans hold about minority women are not the same. I happen to believe that in this country, the most degrading and vicious stereotypes are reserved for Black women. We are all familiar with the most well-known ones, but I will name them anyway: Aunt Jemima, Jezebel, Sapphire, lazy promiscuous welfare mother, emasculating matriarch. There are stereotypes of women of other ethnicities as well. Many of these images are also negative and degrading, but I do not believe that they are as unrelenting, defeminizing, or as deeply rooted as the stereotypes held about Black women. In terms of white America's beauty standards, in which women are ranked by skin color and hair texture, Black women are ranked at the bottom. Of all women in this country, Black women are the least likely to marry, the most likely to be divorced, and the least likely to remarry.<sup>1</sup> These realities have consequences for Black women's economic status as well as for social aspects of their lives. Black women have the lowest rates of exogamy of any women of

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<sup>1</sup> See M. Belinda Tucker & Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, *Trends in African-American Family Formation: A Theoretical and Statistical Overview*, in *THE DECLINE IN MARRIAGE AMONG AFRICAN-AMERICANS: CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS* 12 (M. Belinda Tucker & Claudia Mitchell-Kernan eds., 1995) (noting lower rates of marriage and higher rates of divorce for Black women); M. Belinda Tucker & Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, *Marital Behavior and Expectations: Ethnic Comparisons of Attitudinal and Structural Correlates*, in *THE DECLINE OF MARRIAGE*, *supra*, at 167 (noting lower rates of remarriage for Black women).

color—more than any others, they are partnered with the men who share their oppression.<sup>2</sup>

I point out these facts not because I think that they raise the most important issues for Black women, but because they draw attention to what I think is not a comfortable issue for women of color to think and talk about. The reality is that there is a hierarchy among women of color that ultimately may warrant an analysis that is as searching as that which women of color have applied to mainstream feminism. With respect to many issues that confront women who are not white, the hierarchy I describe is probably irrelevant. Clearly, we all have common interests in issues such as reproductive choice and health care. But there are other matters where issues of identity and the kind of hierarchy I described may raise different issues for different groups of women. It is probably my sense of this that leads me to think of myself as a Black woman rather than a "woman of color."

White America also has stereotypes of non-white men of different ethnicities, but Black men conjure up in the white mind unique images in terms of physical strength, sexuality, and menace. Because of the specific negative ways in which Blacks of either gender are regarded, I have often felt that racism in this society does not simply focus on minority status—instead there is a unique and powerful stigma that is specifically attached to African ancestry. Consequently, I often have wondered whether in the future, in our increasingly multi-racial and interracial country, people of African ancestry will warrant and will need some form of unique protection under the law.

In light of my own view that the oppression of Blacks is different than that of other people of color, it does not surprise me that other

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<sup>2</sup> Precise statistics on rates of exogamy of different ethnic groups are hard to find because of factors such as issues of racial self-identification, different definitions of race and ethnicity (particularly in the case of Latinos), and diverse countries of origin (i.e., statistics differ for different groups among Asian-Americans); but some information is available. See, e.g., Richard D. Alba & Reid M. Golden, *Patterns of Ethnic Marriage in the United States*, 65 *SOCIAL FORCES* 202, 202-06 (1986) (stating that the 1980 Census indicated rates of exogamy of approximately 30% for Latino women born after 1950); D.Y. Yuan, *Significant Demographic Characteristics of Chinese Who Intermarry in the United States*, 3 *CAL. SOCIOLOGIST* 184, 186 (1980) (noting rates of exogamy of Chinese women at approximately 12% in 1980); Gary D. Sandefur & Trudy McKinnell, *American Indian Intermarriage*, 15 *SOC. SCI. RES.* 347, 347-56 (1986) (stating that in the 1980s, Native American exogamy rates were 40% in states with large concentrations of Native Americans, and over 60% in states with small dispersed populations). In 1990, approximately six percent of African-Americans were married to partners across racial lines, with Black men two and one-half times more likely than Black women to enter into such unions. See ANDREW BILLINGSLEY, *CLIMBING JACOB'S LADDER: THE ENDURING LEGACY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN FAMILIES* 245, 247 (1992).

groups might see their own circumstances as also requiring a more focused analysis. Thus, I was not surprised at the outgrowth, a few years ago, of LatCrit from the Critical Race Theory Workshop. It is my impression that over time there was unhappiness on the part of some people with what they considered to be Black domination of the Critical Race enterprise. Also, I increasingly was aware that some people believed that analyses that drew heavily upon the historical and present-day relationship between Blacks and whites constituted a narrow, limiting, and perhaps illegitimate way to look at race, which some, in a negative tone, termed "the black/white paradigm."

The focus of this panel is on how we self-identify and what this means for questions of coalition. The name selected for the newer group, "LatCrit" is, of course, an identifier. The word "race" does not appear in the name selected. Nor does the name selected for the group refer generally to people of color—it specifically references the Latino experience, presumably reflecting the need of Latinos to focus on their own identity, history, and current issues.

As I noted earlier in the example of Black women, people of color of different ethnicities do have some different issues and people can feel marginalized by analyses and labels that gloss over differences that they think are important. I suppose that the important question is whether law professors of color can find ways to work together effectively on common issues in settings that are not short-circuited by this reality. We need to think about a number of issues. Is it wise, over the long run, to have any working group that is, or is perceived to be, dominated by one group even though it welcomes others? Inevitably, over time, someone is likely to feel marginalized. Should scholars of color of different ethnicities meet separately, and try to come together as one group only occasionally? Or is it preferable to attempt to have one group across ethnicities that struggles with issues of intra-group equality and perhaps rotates its focus so as to highlight different ethnicities? Is it productive for women of color to parse out and focus on our differences? Some people may feel that to do so uncovers issues that need to be addressed and forces important, unspoken truths to be said out loud. Others may feel that such an approach is merely divisive and deflects attention from important issues in which we all have an important investment. The point is that how we identify ourselves and what groups we feel a part of or different from does affect the structures that we choose to work within as people of color.

I do not want to overemphasize any of these matters. What we do as academics in general and our recent focus, perhaps obsession, with issues of identity may be regarded by some as self-absorbed navel-

gazing by a small number of minority folk leading cushy lives far from the realities of poor minority communities. What we do in these classrooms and in front of our computers may be a lot less important than what some other people are doing in the real world to change the material conditions in people's lives. Still, I happen to believe that what we do as academics is important, not simply in terms of our theoretical work, but also in terms of whatever, as a practical matter, we can do in this present climate to keep the doors of law schools open to minority students.

Issues of identity—who we see ourselves or want to see ourselves as similar to or distinct from and whether we feel included or marginalized—have implications for building coalitions at whatever level we are operating. There is strength in numbers, and unity can be just as powerful in the academy as it is in other places. I guess that is why it is important for us to continue to struggle with these issues.